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SUBJECT: A PUBLIC DIPLOMACY STRATEGY FOR SAUDI ARABIA

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Classified By: Ambassador James Oberwetter, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION: The events of 9/11 profoundly affected the U.S.-Saudi relationship, forcing a rethinking of diplomacy as well as public diplomacy on both sides. This rethinking found positive expression in the joint statements issued in Crawford following the April 2005 visit of then-Crown Prince Abdullah and at the November 2005 launch of the U.S.-Saudi Strategic Dialogue in Jeddah. The U.S. mission to Saudi Arabia and, we would argue, the U.S. government as a whole, needs to be first and foremost a catalyst to advance the goals set out in these statements, and only secondarily an entrepreneur. We need to be country-specific in our approach, taking into account Saudi Arabia's vast intellectual poverty amidst its equally vast material wealth. We must be timely in our response to the shifts in elite and popular Saudi opinion that the global media can so quickly influence, yet recognize that lasting change will come slowly. This exceedingly conservative, deeply religious, historically isolated land is still struggling with the modern question of how far and how fast to engage with the outside world, and it will do so for at least another generation. END SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

Bringing More Saudi Students to the U.S.

12. (C) A Flood of Saudi Students: Sixty years have passed since the establishment of the modern U.S.-Saudi relationship during the February 14, 1945 meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abd al-Aziz Al Saud. After Americans built the Saudi oil industry, a whole generation of Saudis spent their formative years in the U.S. -- their numbers at American colleges and universities peaked at 25,000 in 1978 -- and now they have children of their own. The Saudi government decided after the April 2005 meeting in Crawford to replicate this experience for this generation, announcing a scholarship program that will send some 15,000 young people to study in the U.S. in the coming months and years. More than 47,000 young Saudis applied for these scholarships, and some 3,206 have been awarded since May. Three thousand more are in the pipeline. The modest proposal we made to set up an undergraduate scholarship program named in honor of the 1945 meeting between President Roosevelt and King Abd al-Aziz likely served as a catalyst for the larger decision. New oil wealth has fueled the Saudis' scholarship program. So far it has not proven necessary for us to assume any entrepreneurial role in this effort.

13. (C) The FDR-AAS Scholarship Program: Nevertheless we believe it is profoundly in the US interest to move forward with implementation of the proposed Franklin Delano Roosevelt -- Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (FDR-AAS) scholarship program. As currently envisioned, the FDR-AAS initiative would be an elite scholarship program with very competitive admissions criteria. Its aim would be to identify and give both an American education and a positive, profound

experience of American society and democracy to the rising new generation of leaders in Saudi Arabia. As such, this program would symbolize the spirit of the Crawford Summit Meeting between President Bush and King Abdullah, the strength and continuity of the 60-year-old US-Saudi relationship, and the role of education in the revitalized bilateral relationship and the reform process in the Kingdom.

14. (C) Boosting Our Consular Infrastructure: Meanwhile the Saudis are paying for their larger program out of pocket. We should take advantage of it. A surprisingly diverse group of young Saudi men and women are clearly amenable to going to the U.S., now that their government has endorsed this idea and paid for it. These students will gain understanding and insight into America and what it stands for, even if they do not agree with all of our policies. (For the moment, for several reasons, it is much harder for us to bring Americans to the Kingdom.) The principal constraint we face is our limited capacity to meet the demand for student visas. The heroic efforts of the officers and staff of our drawn-down Consular operations have enabled us to rise to the challenge: we are processing ten times the number of student visas we did last year. We cannot sustain this pace in either Riyadh or Jeddah, which is currently closed for visa operations. We need to increase capacity at both posts and to reopen for visa services in Dhahran as soon as possible. Visa reciprocity issues need to be addressed now.

15. (U) In terms of support for this effort from the public diplomacy side of our mission, we have put audio-visual equipment and/or Washington-generated materials ranging from "Hi" magazine to e-Journals to poster shows in the Consular waiting areas at all three posts, and will continue these initiatives. For our in-house educational advising services, we need another year of special funding for salaries. This will buy us time to persuade the Saudis, here and in Washington, to allow us to contract out this function to AMIDEAST or another qualified U.S. non-governmental organization such as the Institute for International Education. The ACCESS microscholarship program for intensive English preparation can serve as an important bridge to the U.S. experience for Saudi youth: most are behind their regional peers in both foreign language competency and social skills, justifying the higher intensity (now 630 hours of instruction in a year, versus 200-300 elsewhere) and slightly older population (mainly 18-20 year olds, versus 15-17) of our program. We continue to encourage a small, one-way high-school exchange program, run by AFS, in the hope that security conditions and/or a change to fully private funding will allow a two-way exchange in time.

Inside the Kingdom: More Focus on Education and Engagement with Saudi Youth

16. (U) Within the Kingdom, we should support and encourage the growing trend toward privately-funded U.S.-style colleges and universities. In our view, "match-making" is the most important thing the U.S. government can do in this arena, whether informally by networking into the U.S. education industry or using tools like the international and voluntary visitors programs to send Saudis to the U.S. This trend is visible from Dar al-Hekma and Effat Colleges for women and the College of Business Administration in Jeddah, which opened five to seven years ago, to Riyadh's Al-Yamama College and Al-Faisal University and Dhahran's Muhammad bin Fahd University, starting up this year and next. All have explicit ties to American institutions. To a lesser extent, we have begun to see the impact of the U.S. model on the public universities, from the Ministry of Higher Education's nationwide "community college" network, which was based on state of California system, to the recent memorandum of understanding between Jeddah's King Abdulaziz

University and Virginia Tech.

¶7. (U) American and Western studies programs per se have failed to gain acceptance here at the ministerial level. Our observation is that they have produced mixed results in the region. They are unlikely to succeed here. However, providing support for this kind of university-level coursework in the form of materials and possibly guest speakers or lecturers will be of value, including at additional "American Corners." At the primary and secondary levels, the Saudis are already in close touch with U.S. textbook suppliers like Harcourt, Brace, as well as with American technology companies like Microsoft.

¶8. (U) Libraries and Publishers: We can make a separate but related push to support the Kingdom's newly-announced plans to build many more public libraries with referrals to American publishers and gifts of materials. We envision using tactics from the highly symbolic, such as delivering sets of 200 classics of American literature like that sent to Dar al-Hekma on the occasion of U/S Hughes' visit, to the very substantive, notably by acting as a catalyst to link American scholars and librarians to their Saudi and regional counterparts.

¶9. (C) Fighting Terrorism by Filling the Intellectual Vacuum: We would also like to reiterate the proposal made in reftel (B), regarding creation of a regional on-line library that would contain the classics of both Arab and Western literature. The aim of this initiative would be to attack the intellectual vacuum in the Arab and Islamic world, which is so conducive to the spread of extremism and bigotry. The on-line library would have a strong focus on democracy, democratic thought, and civil society. As noted in reftel, we believe that the USG can act as a catalyst in establishing this initiative, which would then be handed off to a consortium of US, European, and Arab universities, institutes, and scholars. We here in Mission Saudi Arabia can contribute by engaging with both the Saudi government and the Kingdom's library and university systems, as well as the private sector. Once again, the Kingdom's currently booming economic growth should provide much of the funding needed to support Saudi involvement in such an initiative.

Inside the Kingdom: Other Kinds of Engagement and Exchange

¶10. (U) Small programs often take the same amount of time as large ones in the difficult operating environment of Saudi Arabia, and we will continue to do what we can to achieve the most for the investment of our time. Yet as our staffing pattern slowly returns to a more normal profile from the drawdown, we can revive our efforts to get mid- and entry-level officers from all mission elements involved in public diplomacy events and programs. Our Consulates in Jeddah and Dhahran, in particular, represent more liberal areas of the country, and can do things that can't be done in the Saudi capital. Timely new Washington product offerings, such as the "All Americans" poster show featuring artwork by Texas schoolchildren, as well as the materials on civil rights activist Rosa Parks, will be of great help.

¶11. (C) Classic exchange programs continue to yield great benefit in our outreach to certain segments of Saudi society. The country-specific religious educators international visitor program, just renewed for 30 participants this year, is perhaps the best example. By adapting the traditional recruiting model slightly, i.e., by working closely with the Saudi government to select most of the participants from among "persuadable conservatives," we were able to reach a previously inaccessible group that has taken on new importance in the post-9/11 policy environment. At the "liberal" end of the political and social spectrum, we can continue to use invitations to travel on exchange programs to press the Saudis to allow political reformers and activists to travel, thereby

signaling U.S. interest in their cases.

The Private Sector

¶12. (U) In addition to our own and Saudi government programs, we need to approach the U.S. and Saudi private sectors to do more. There was never an Arab socialist model in place here, so speakers and other programming about free enterprise, business and commerce work well, and are topical as Saudi Arabia accedes to the WTO. Economic reform means regulatory training programs, which we are currently pursuing ad hoc by having our traditional State officers contact Washington entities such as the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Internal Revenue Service to lobby them to develop special training programs for Saudis. We need someone in Washington to take this effort on. The Humphrey Fellowship program simply does not meet the need. The network of Chambers of Commerce throughout the country, including the women's sections that exist in Riyadh, Dhahran and Jeddah, can serve as good partners in our programming goals. Recent events, such as women being both elected and appointed to the Chamber of Commerce in Jeddah, have had a national impact.

The Media

¶13. (U) Finally, in Saudi Arabia's increasingly interesting media environment, we need to make more use of our senior officers, as well as the Ambassador and our designated spokespersons. We would like to endorse Embassy Cairo's observations about the use of television, especially the pan-Arab channels (Ref A, para 7), since in Saudi Arabia, over 90% of households are satellite subscribers. Our view is that Washington is doing a much better job getting senior officials before the pan-Arab media, but that there is still room for improvement.

Concerns and Needs

¶14. (C) Our concerns about the U.S. government's public diplomacy efforts include these:

- 1) Too many tools, each with differing standards, and recruiting methods for exchange programs. Can some of these programs be sunset?
- 2) Timely media outreach. Who can help us cut through the clearance thickets so that we can respond to issues on a timely basis?

¶15. (C) Our needs fall into three categories:

A) Personnel: Our greatest need in Saudi Arabia is for qualified officers and staff to carry out this PD strategy. For most of the past two difficult but critically important years, we have been operating at half strength in terms of American officers, yet we have seen more than one promised public diplomacy hand diverted to other posts. We need to assign language-qualified, at-grade, PD-cone officers to the existing public diplomacy positions at Embassy Riyadh and the two Consulates General in Dhahran and Jeddah. In addition, in order to implement this strategy successfully, we need four new public diplomacy officer positions in the Mission, two in Riyadh and one each in Jeddah and Dhahran. Commensurate increases in LES staffing in the public diplomacy sections in the Consulates will also be necessary.

B) Funding: Even though ours remains a highly-leveraged plan of action, a second need is for additional funding to carry out plans, either directly or through outsourcing. Inter alia, additional funding would support implementation of our FDR-AAS and on-line library of classic Arab and Western works of literature, with a strong focus on democracy and civil society.

C) Political Support: Support and focus from Washington policymakers is the third and last but not the least of our critical needs. We would like to thank the new Undersecretary for the opportunity to participate in this exercise, and look forward to further discussions.

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